

**MY  
NEIGHBOUR'S  
FAITH –  
AND MINE**

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# **MY NEIGHBOUR'S FAITH— AND MINE**

**THEOLOGICAL  
DISCOVERIES  
THROUGH  
INTERFAITH  
DIALOGUE**

**A STUDY GUIDE**

World Council of Churches, Geneva

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# Introduction

## An invitation

We invite you to join us in a study of what it means to be a Christian in a culturally, religiously and ideologically plural world. We hope that small groups of people in all our churches and in all parts of the world will accept our invitation and the study will be truly ecumenical. We also hope that we would be able to pursue this theological reflection within the context of a living dialogue with people of other faiths.

This invitation comes to you from the Dialogue Sub-unit of the World Council of Churches. In 1984, the Central Committee of the WCC accepted a recommendation of the working group on dialogue for a five-year study programme. Accordingly, the WCC's Dialogue Sub-unit launched the work with three meetings of people who represented a variety of cultural and confessional backgrounds. This booklet is the result of their efforts. It tells you what the purpose of the study is and how you may take part in it. An international consultation in 1989 will analyze the responses from around the world, and its findings will be shared with you and with all our churches.

## A historical note

For a long time, people within the ecumenical movement have been trying to grasp the meaning of our obedience to the gospel in a world of many religions and cultures. The World Missionary Conferences at Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938) struggled to understand the significance of other faiths in relation to the gospel. When the International Missionary Council became part of the World Council of Churches in 1961, this concern was assigned to the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

In 1971 a separate sub-unit was formed to promote dialogue between people of living faiths. A major landmark in this sub-unit's development was the 1977 meeting at Chiang Mai, Thailand, where a group of Christians representing many different ecclesiastical traditions drew up *Guidelines on Dialogue*, which has become the basis of this type of work in the Sub-unit and the churches.

During the past few years, the Sub-unit has organized a number of Hindu-Christian, Muslim-Christian, Buddhist-Christian and Jewish-Christian dialogues at

international and regional levels. It has at the same time encouraged local dialogues. Occasionally, the Sub-unit gathered representatives of traditional religions and cultures for interaction and dialogue. Multilateral dialogues (involving people from several religions) took place in Ajaltoun (1970), Colombo (1974), and Mauritius (1983). All these gatherings have served to open a new mode of relating to people of living faiths and ideological convictions.

### **The present context**

During the last few decades, questions about religious and cultural pluralism and the growing influence of secular and technological thinking have attracted renewed interest in the churches. Christian groups in predominantly Marxist societies are also seeking ways to enter into a new dialogue with their neighbours. Everywhere there is a fresh sense of urgency to build creative relationships. As interest in dialogue has grown, so has its actual practice, enabling various religious communities to understand one another better and to work more closely together.

People engaged in dialogue have felt their own faith challenged and deepened by the new dimensions of religious life which they have observed, and many find in inter-religious encounter a new impetus for doing theology and reviving spirituality. Communities in dialogue function as the leaven in the larger community, facilitating the creation of a society transcending religious barriers. This experience, however, has also provoked questions about some of our theological presuppositions about people of other faiths and their convictions. We stand at a historic moment when the Christian theological tradition must take full account of the experiences of those who have been living for centuries in religiously plural societies, as well as of the convictions of those who are newly stimulated by the broadening religious plurality of their surroundings. Our experience in dialogue suggests strongly that many of our "classical" theological assumptions need to be informed and challenged afresh by the new realities of our times.

### **The purpose of the study**

This study is thus a response to the inescapable necessity of setting our theology in the context of contemporary religious plurality. Of course, its intention is not to provide answers to the complex theological questions involved in relating to the faith and witness of others. These issues have deeply divided Christian theology and no definitive solutions have emerged. Distinctions based on natural and special revelation and theories which project certain traditions as preparation for evangelization have proved inadequate, but a fresh exploration could well lead us to the discovery — or rediscovery — within our heritage of the spiritual indicators we need for the way forward.

Nor is it our purpose to provide information about other faiths. It is, rather, to promote an awareness of our neighbours as people of living faiths, whose beliefs and practices should become integral elements in our theological thinking about the world and the human community. In other words, this study is a call to Christians to make theological sense of the faiths of their neighbours. Hitherto, Christian theological reflection has not taken this seriously, but when the faith of our neighbours informs the way we observe and understand our own beliefs, we are bound to be challenged to seek new dimensions of our own faith. In so doing we

may also discover our neighbours in a new light, and so learn to live with them in closer community.

We cannot of course be unmindful of the many situations in the world where religious communities are caught up in situations of conflict. Nor can we ignore the rise of conservative, at times militant, expressions of religion disrupting the life of communities which have for centuries lived in peace. We must recognize that religions and religious movements have often been coopted in the past — and are coopted today — by demonic powers in the world.

We must also recognize the wide gulf between theory and practice. The ideals enshrined in religious scriptures are not always evident in the day-to-day life of their followers. We have little reason to approach religious traditions in a mood of romantic enthusiasm.

Our study, however, is an attempt, to consider the religious quest of humankind in its better manifestations. Even those of us who have legitimate reservations about certain aspects of religions should learn to affirm and to relate to what is of value in the life and witness of their devotees. That is why the study is not so much about other faiths as our own; it is about how we may understand our faith better as we live with friends and neighbours who follow other faiths. All religions have a theology of other “religions”, whether expressed or not, and today we are all under pressure to review it, relate more positively to people of other faiths and grow in togetherness and community.

We invite you, then, to join us in this exploration, in the common quest for a relevant and meaningful relationship with people of other faiths. The task is not easy; it takes courage both to think and relate in new ways. We hope that you will enjoy being part of the company of Christians engaged in this search in many parts of the world.

# A Note on Method

## **Study groups**

This study is designed to be carried out by small groups of people who will commit themselves to meet regularly for a few months. The groups should include men and women, clergy and laity, and people who might bring a variety of theological perspectives. In those settings where it is possible, the study process would be enriched if the group is ecumenical in composition. One or more members should be assigned to take detailed notes of the discussions to enable the group, at the conclusion of the study process, to communicate its findings and insights to the Sub-unit on Dialogue.

## **The process of study**

The study has nine major sections, and each section has from one to three study units. Each study unit in most cases has three parts:

- 1) texts that introduce the topic;
- 2) a short commentary to focus on the issues raised by the texts;
- 3) suggestions and questions for discussion.

Because there are many different contexts in which the study will be undertaken, the groups are invited to add their own texts, commentaries, and questions, if that will help clarify particular issues that are relevant in their own situations.

The study groups will bring different contexts and backgrounds to the theological discoveries study. In exceptional cases, there may be some groups, especially in seminary contexts, that may wish to do more outside reading. They may wish to extend their actual knowledge of people of other faiths through additional study, or they may want to do further reading in contemporary thinking on the theology of religions. A few bibliographical references are provided at the back of this book, but relevant readings will have been decided upon locally.

## **Involvement of people of other faiths**

It is important and integral to this study that it includes some common experiences of dialogue with people of other faiths in our own localities. The study will enable some participants to articulate theological discoveries that have emerged from many years of inter-religious relationship and dialogue. For others,

this focus on the relation of Christians to people of other faiths may be a new one. Thus, your group should decide how, in the process of this study, you will include the first-hand experience and testimony of people of other faiths in your own community. Here are some of the ways in which this could be done:

- A. The group may invite people from other religious traditions to participate in one or two of the unit discussions, making clear the nature and purpose of the study.
- B. Alternatively or in addition, the group may plan, together with friends from other faiths, a series of two or three special sessions ranging across the general topics of the study and including others that are important in your community. This will enable the members of the study group to have some common experiences and references in the study discussions. In the process of the study, stay in touch with those whom you come to know.
- C. The group should arrange with neighbours of other faiths to visit their places of worship, or community gathering, if this is possible in your area. Again, discuss the purposes of the study and prepare yourselves, with the help of friends of other faiths, for such visits.

While the study is primarily an occasion for Christian theological reflection on the significance of other faiths and our neighbours of other faiths, it should not be pursued in isolation. It is important that a special effort is made, as an integral part of the study, to engage the group as a whole in some common experiences with people of other faiths.



## STUDY I

# Living in a Religiously Plural World

### 1. Texts

Listen to these stories of how three persons became aware of religious pluralism in their own life situations:

- a) *In Sudbury, Canada, the pastor of a local church has just returned to his study in his new pastoral charge. He himself is of East Indian origin. Suddenly, he stops a moment, sure that he is hearing Sanskrit chanting. He shakes his head and wonders if he is hearing things, but then walks towards the source of the chanting in the basement church hall. There he finds the local Hindu community holding their weekly service, and is invited to join in their celebration. Later, in discussing his discovery with the elders of his church, he finds out that the Hindu community has been using the church hall for over 12 years and that it was such an accepted part of their community life that they had forgotten to mention it as anything special to their new pastor. The Ganges has truly come to the north shore of Lake Superior.*
- b) *I was born in a Muslim community in Kenya, but my parents were Christians. So we as their children inherited the Christian faith and lived in it all through our lives. My sisters, my brother and I love the Lord Jesus as our personal saviour. This did not make us hate our fellow brothers and sisters in the Islamic faith, but we loved them as equally as ourselves. Mother and father reminded us that we must love them all the time. Also some of my extended family belonged to the Islamic faith. I lived with relations who were Muslims...*
- c) *My grandmother, when she came to the United States from Sweden in 1911, had only one book: the Bible in Swedish. She had never met a Hindu or Muslim. She had never read the Bhagavad Gita or heard the Qur'an recited. Although I went as a student to India to study Sanskrit and Hinduism, she could not fully grasp what I was up to. Until the day she died, she thought of me and*

## 2 My Neighbour's Faith — and Mine

*introduced me to her friends as “my grand-daughter, who is a missionary in India”. What else, in her worldview, could I possibly be doing there? Without diminishing in the least the integrity of her faith, I must say that to be a Christian is, for me, very different from what it was for her. I have lived for years in India, in the sacred city of Banaras. I have seen the faith of Hindus, as they embrace the joys of life and struggle with its sorrows. I have read the Bhagavad Gita over and over, and have found new insight there. I simply cannot bracket these things and put them out of my mind and heart when I consider what it means to be a Christian today, living in relationship with neighbours, teachers, and loved ones who are Hindu.*

### 2. Comment

These three stories illustrate how religious pluralism and its consequences became real in the lives of three persons. A great number of Christians have lived for centuries in religiously plural societies. Today, as more and more communities and nations become multi-religious, we as Christians need to respond thoughtfully and faithfully to the fact that many of our neighbours, with whom we live and work, live their lives by other faiths.

In places that have become newly multi-religious, Christians are reacting to the new situation in a number of ways. Some simply ignore the changes around them. They continue their previous forms of community life and worship as if they were unaware of the transformation around them. Or they choose to move to another neighbourhood or town, where they will not have to face the issue. In some places Christians feel threatened and become hostile to neighbours of other faiths. They try to make things difficult for them in the community. They may make it hard for a local Muslim group to build a new mosque or for the local Hindus to hold a festival. Often, however, the attitude of Christians is one of indifferent tolerance. They are outwardly pleasant but inwardly indifferent.

In societies where Christians have lived with people of other faiths for centuries, especially as minorities, attitudes are shaped by long historical experience. The relationship is sometimes characterized by defensiveness and a polemical spirit. More often, however, living relationships have led to the sharing of common life and discoveries of similarities in religious experience. The affirmation of common cultural and national identity has helped transcend confessional barriers in daily life.

In situations of religious conflict, Christians may be tempted to isolate themselves from the rest of society and develop a minority-centred attitude, socially, politically and religiously. Others may try to accept any experience of suffering they encounter as a minority in a spirit of “evangelical” humility and love, faithful to their vocation as a church, but at the same time struggle together with their fellow citizens for justice and peace.

All the three stories deal with situations where Christians have been brought into contact with people who live by other faiths. These contacts have the potential to enrich their relationship with them. For the members of the Sudbury church there is relationship with Hindus, in fact and in potential, because a Hindu community worships in the church hall. To the African Christian in Kenya, life with Muslims is part of family life and relationships. For the grandmother of the woman from North

America, she could do nothing better in India than be a missionary. But she herself has been challenged and changed by the Hindus she has met and come to know. Many Christians throughout the world have similar experiences. They remain firmly grounded in the Christian faith, and yet are moved, enriched and enlivened by the insights and the faith of others who are not Christian. How has Christian theology been able to speak to those who have had such experiences?

Theological responses to religious pluralism have been varied. Some have maintained what might be called an “exclusivist” Christian response: that there is truth and salvation only in the way of Christ. Others have developed what might be called an “inclusivist” view: that the Christ event is cosmic and inclusive, and Christ is present and at work even among those who may not know Christ as such. In this view, people of other faiths are included in God’s plan of salvation through the grace of Christ. Still other Christians take a third position which might be called a “pluralist” view: that God, or what followers of some other religions call “reality”, can be known in many different ways. Those who take this view see the activity of the Creator God within the plurality of the world. They seek to discern the activity of the Spirit even beyond the boundaries of the church. And they affirm God’s saving activity in many places, within many traditions and in many ways.

### **3. Discussion and questions**

Begin by describing your local religious situation. What are the different religious communities in your town, in your area, in your country? Make notes, perhaps on a blackboard, about your local situation.

Think together about the world situation. Map the “religious world” as best as you can. What do you think is the percentage of Christians in the world? Jews? Muslims? Hindus? Buddhists? (See page 53 for answers.) Where do people of different religious traditions seem to live together in harmony? in conflict?

★ Think about your own church or churches. What has been done in your church to understand and relate to neighbours of other faiths? Describe any initiatives that have taken place to relate to or work with them.

Think about your own personal experience. What kinds of contacts have you had with people of other religious traditions? Share the experiences so that as you begin your work as a group you have a sense of your collective history and experience with people of other faiths. What are the attitudes, or theological positions, held in relation to other faiths? Have your attitudes changed over the years? How do you assess them now, as you pursue this study? What is the attitude of neighbours of other faiths to the Christian community in your place? (after, talk)



## STUDY II

# Creation

### 1. Texts

Creation is a basic theme of the Bible. In fact the Bible begins with the story of creation. Many of the Psalms celebrate the theme. Creation is also a basic assumption in the New Testament which ends with a vision of a new creation.

Creation, however, is also a basic theme in many other religious traditions. Here are some examples:

a) From the Shinto thought:

*The grains that grow,  
The myriad trees and grasses —  
All are blessings  
Of the Great Kami of the Sun  
Who lightens the Heaven.*

*But for the blessings  
of the Kami  
Of Heaven and earth,  
could we live  
One day, one night?*

*The food that sustains life,  
our clothes, our dwelling —  
They are the blessings  
of our Ruler  
of our Kami.*

Motoori Norinaga

Tsunetsugu Muraoka, *Studies in Shinto Thought*,  
Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, 1964, p.157.

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b) The following text from the ancient and influential Chinese classic, the *Tao Te Ching*, emphasizes the universal principle, Tao, the Way, that undergirds all created order:

*There was something formless yet complete,  
That existed before heaven and earth;  
Without sound, without substance,  
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,  
All-pervading, unfailing.  
One may think of it as the mother of all things under heaven.  
Its true name we do not know;  
"Way" is the by-name that we give it.  
Were I forced to say to what class of things it belongs  
I should call it Great.*

*Tao Te Ching* XXV, from Arthur Waley,  
*The Way and its Power*, New York, Grove Press, 1958.

c) From the Pacific Islands of Polynesia, there is this story of creation by God, called Ta'aroa:

*He existed, Ta'aroa was his name.  
In the immensity (space)  
There was no sea, there was no man.  
Above, Ta'aroa calls.  
Existing alone, he became the universe.  
Ta'aroa is the origin, the rocks.  
Ta'aroa is the sands.  
It is thus that he is named.  
Ta'aroa is the light;  
Ta'aroa is within;  
Ta'aroa is the germ.  
Ta'aroa is beneath;  
Ta'aroa is firm,  
Ta'aroa is wise.  
He created the land of Hawaii,  
Hawaii the great and sacred,  
As a body or shell for Ta'aroa....*

E.S. Craighill Handy, *Polynesian Religion*, Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 34, Honolulu, Bishop Museum Press, 1927.

Reproduced in Charles Long, *Alpha: the Myths of Creation*, New York, Braziller, 1963.

d) The understanding of creation is also revealed in prayers to the Creator, as in this modern Zoroastrian prayer:

*Thou, dear Ahura Mazda, art the Master Planner, the Lord of all Creation; the Essence of Boundless Time and the very Spirit of Truth and Goodness. Thou art All-Wise and All-Knowing. Not a leaf falls but Thou knowest it. Thou tellest the*

*number of trees and the leaves upon them. Thou knowest the number of particles of sand on any seashore and the number of stars overhead. Thou knowest me better than I know myself.*

Quoted in "Learning from Other Faiths", George Appleton,  
Third Lambeth Interfaith Lecture, 1981, p.2.

e) This Hindu text is from the Svetasvatara Upanishad which, according to many interpreters, celebrates the Personal God as Ultimate Reality:

*The One who rules over every single source,  
In whom this whole world comes together and dissolves,  
The Lord, the blessing-giver, God adorable —  
By revering Him one goes for ever to His peace.*

*More minute than the minute, in the midst of confusion  
The Creator of all, of manifold forms,  
The One embracer of the universe —  
By knowing Him as kindly one attains peace forever.*

*By knowing as kindly Him who is hidden in all things,  
Exceedingly fine, like the cream that is finer than butter,  
The One embracer of the universe —  
By knowing God one is released from all fetters.*

*His form is not to be beheld.  
No one-soever sees Him with the eye,  
They who thus know Him with heart and mind  
As abiding in the heart, become immortal.*

From R.E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*,  
London, Oxford, University Press, 1971, pp. 404-405.

## 2. Comment

The creation stories in different religious traditions have a variety of functions in their total belief systems. In the Shinto text there is emphasis on creation (nature) as the expression of the benevolent presence of the divine with the whole of nature. In the Taoist text, on the other hand, the focus is on the principle (Tao) that governs all life calling on the whole of creation, including humanity, to be in a harmonious relationship. In the Polynesian account of creation, Ta'aroa seems to create the universe out of his very self. The Svetasvatara Upanishad tells of a Creator who is at once supreme and the very essence of all things. He is not only a principle or reality, but a kindly God, whom one can adore and worship.

## 3. Discussion and questions

Study the biblical stories of creation found in Genesis 1 and 2, perhaps looking also at a hymn to the Creator, such as that found in Psalm 104.

Discuss your own understandings of creation, with the input and insights drawn from these and similar accounts of creation in other traditions. This might be a



## STUDY III

# Scriptures

### 1. Texts

Almost all of the major religious traditions of the world have scriptures, either written down or transmitted in oral tradition. These are seen as the sources of their faith, and often as directly revealed by the Divine. Here are some statements about scriptures, both from the scriptures themselves and from adherents of the traditions:

a) *Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write these words, for according to these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments*

Ex. 34:27-28

A rabbinic midrash:

*Can there be a sale in which the seller sells himself along with the object he sells? God says, “I sold you my Torah, and with it I, as it were, sold myself.” The matter is like a king who had an only daughter, and another king sought her and got her in marriage. The father said, “My daughter is an only child: I cannot be parted from her, and yet to say, Do not take her away, is also impossible, for she is your wife. Do me, therefore, this kindness: whithersoever you go, prepare for me a chamber that I may dwell with you, for I cannot forsake my daughter.” So God says to Israel, “I have given you my Torah; I cannot be separated from her. Yet I cannot say to you, Do not take her. Therefore in every place whither you go, make me a house wherein I may dwell.” ... When a man buys a desirable object in the market, does he usually buy also its owner? But God, when he gave the Torah to Israel, said, “With the Torah you, as it were, take also me.”*

*Exodus Rabbah, Terumah 33.1.6,*  
translation in C. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*,  
Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1963.

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b) *It is as from a fire laid with damp fuel, clouds of smoke separately issue forth, so lo, verily, from this great Being (Brahman) has been breathed forth that which is Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda.*

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 2.4.10 in A.O. Hume, trans.,  
*The Thirteen Principal Upanishads.*

*The Vedas are called Sruti (that which is heard), while the rest of the sacred writings are known as Smriti (that which is remembered). Great sages and seers are said to have heard the eternal truths of religion and to have left a record of them for the benefit of others. The Vedas are therefore said to be eternal, their composers being only the channels through which the revelations of the Supreme have come. Accordingly, the Sruti forms the supreme authority for Hinduism.*

D.S.Sarma, "The Nature and History of Hinduism",  
in K.W.Morgan, ed., *The Religion of the Hindus*, p.7.

c) *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate  
Recite! In the Name of thy Lord who created,  
created Man of a blood-clot.*

*Recite! And thy Lord is the Most Generous,  
who taught by the Pen,  
taught Man that (which) he knew not.*

Qur'an 96: 1-5. A.J.Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*,  
New York, Macmillan, 1955.

*The greatest miracle was the revelation of the Qur'an which was transmitted by the Prophet in messages of unequal length at different times over a period of twenty-three years... The explicit and implicit testimony of the Qur'an is that the author is God Himself. It is never the Prophet who speaks in the Qur'an. The Scripture either refers to him in the third person or addresses him directly — O Prophet, O Messenger, We reveal to thee, We send thee, do this, recite this: such is the language of the Qur'an... The direct proof of the divine origin of the Qur'an is manifest all through the Scripture itself... It is for this reason that the Qur'an holds the highest place in Islam.*

*For Muslims, the Qur'an is not only the text of prayers, the instrument of prophecy, the food for the spirit, the favourite canticle of the soul. It is at the same time the fundamental law, the treasure of the sciences, the mirror of the ages. It is the consolation for the present and the hope for the future. In what it affirms the Qur'an is the criterion of truth. In what it orders or prohibits, it is the best model for behaviour. In what it judges, its judgment is always correct. In what it discusses it gives the decisive argument. In what it says, it is the purest and most beautiful possible expression in speech. It calms and incites most effectively. Since the Qur'an is the direct expression of the divine will, it holds supreme authority for all men.*

Muhammad Abd Allah Draz, in K.W. Morgan, ed.,  
*Islam: the Straight Path*,  
New York, Ronald Press, 1958, pp.21-36.

## 2. Comment

There are many great holy books that may be called “scriptures”: the Bible for Jews and Christians, the Qur'an for the Muslims, the Vedas for the Hindus, the Adi Granth for the Sikhs, the Pali Canon for the Theravada Buddhists and the various texts such as the Lotus Sutra of the Mahayana tradition, the Gathas of the Zoroastrian tradition, and others as well. These play a central role in the spiritual formation and life of the people who live their lives in terms of them. In some cultures that do not have written scriptures, as in the case of most African cultures, and those of the native peoples of America and the Pacific, religious traditions are preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, symbols, rituals and festivals.

In our history we have often looked at the scriptures of other traditions unsympathetically. Some Christians, not fully aware of the definitive role these scriptures play in the life of others and their intense belief about their revealed character, have described them as “human attempts”, “natural revelation”, etc., deeply offending peoples of other traditions. But today there is an increased awareness and interest in the scriptures of other religions. Some Christians read the scriptures of other traditions and affirm that they help them in their spiritual growth. Others are opposed to or hesitant about the use of other scriptures in private or public worship.

## 3. Discussion and questions

Discuss among yourselves some of the ways in which you understand and interpret the Bible as Christian scripture.

With the help and guidance of people of another faith in your community, select a few important passages from their scriptures and study them. Where possible, do this together with friends of other faiths, so that you may understand them in the light of authentic faith experience.

- a) Have you previously had an exposure to the religious traditions of others through their scriptures? If so, what was your response? If not, what were the reasons for hesitating to become familiar with the scriptures of your neighbours?
- b) In view of the fact that our neighbours also believe their scriptures to be revealed, what do we mean when we say that the Bible is the word of God? How do we understand and respond to similar affirmations by others?
- c) Through the scriptures of another tradition, do we come to a better understanding of our neighbours of another faith? To a wider understanding of God? Is there a place for the use of other scriptures in personal spiritual growth? In private prayer? In public worship? What do you think are the issues involved?



a)



b)



正談論相問  
的時候耶穌  
親自就近他  
們和他們同行

路加福音第廿五章十一節  
壬戌年春月題水通妙畫院

## STUDY IV

# Jesus Christ — Deepening Our Understanding of Christ in a Religiously Plural World

### A. CHRISTIAN “IMAGES” OF CHRIST

#### 1. Four artistic interpretations of Christ from different cultures, and a text.

- a) Pantocrator from Byzantine apse, Daphni, 11th century.
- b) Crucifix, Peru, contemporary.
- c) Portrayal of the Emmaus story, China, contemporary.
- d) Drawing of Christ healing a leper, Holland, 17th century.

d)



e) Also consider the following biblical text and a contemporary commentary on it:

*Christ Jesus,... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Phil. 2:5-11

#### A commentary on the text

*If we read the very early Christian hymn from Philippians (quoted and perhaps edited by Paul) in the Jewish context that was his and that of the early church, we might say that it interprets Jesus in the figures of scripture: Christ Jesus, though like Adam in the “image and likeness” of God, did not grasp after equality with God (in contrast with men of the tower of Babel), but became, like Israel, the humble slave of God (cf. the servant poems of Isaiah 42 ff.), obedient to God even unto death. Therefore God exalted him and crowned him with God’s name, that all should fall down before him in whom they are confronted by God, confessing him as Lord so as to give all honour and glory to God the Father, as Jesus did himself.*

Paul van Buren, Theological Significance Study Workshop II, Bossey, 1986.

### 2. Comment

These representations in art as well as the commentary on the Philippians passage are interpretations of Jesus. They are also, indirectly, interpretations of how we understand God. The pictures are as diverse as the various interpretations of Jesus that we find in the New Testament, such as Christ, the son of God, the son of man, New Adam, the word, the Saviour, Redeemer, etc. The Christian tradition has, from the beginning, borne witness to the mystery of Jesus Christ. The interpretation of Christ, however, has been largely determined by the time and place, the cultural context and historical situation of those who experience the presence of God in their encounter with Christ.

### 3. Discussion and questions

Begin by making your own personal responses, as group members, to the images of Christ presented here in art and word. Are there other images that are important to or distinctive to your own culture? Bring along other art forms and images for comment and study. List on a blackboard the images and descriptions of Christ that come to mind when you think of Christ in the Bible, such as the rabbi or teacher, the healer, the suffering and crucified one, the cosmic and eternal Christ through whom all things were created, the Logos, the Good Shepherd, the Rebel, the Liberator, etc. You might discuss your use of the terms “Jesus” and “Christ”.

- a) What understandings of God do these pictures convey? Have these artists seen different “Christs”? Different aspects of the same “Christ”?
- b) What does it mean for our Christian faith that there are many “Christologies”, or understandings of who Christ was and is, both in the Gospels and in the Tradition?
- c) Which interpretation of Christ comes closest to your own? How do you give expression to your understanding of Christ today? What does it mean to speak of Christ within a Trinitarian understanding of God?
- d) How do these various understandings of Christ help us to think about people of other faiths? From your understanding or experience of Christ, what do you think should be the attitude of Christians towards people of other faiths?

## B. OTHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHRIST

### 1. Texts

In dialogue with people of other faiths, we may discover perspectives and insights which could help us in developing our own interpretations of Christ and of God. They may see in Jesus something we have missed, or from the perspective of their own faith they may raise questions that will throw light on the role of Christ in our faith. Consider the following:

- a) The contemporary Zen Buddhist Masao Abe talks about the image of Christ conveyed by St Paul in the passage from Philippians quoted above. He notes that the Christian tradition tends to use “both/and” language to speak of the paradoxical immanence and transcendence of Ultimate Reality, while the Buddhist tradition tends to use “neither/nor” language. He wonders if they do not both convey a similar insight into the nature of Ultimate Reality.

*Since the ultimate truth of religion for Zen is entirely beyond duality, Zen prefers to express it in a negative way. When Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty asked Bodhidharma, “What is the ultimate principle of the holy truth?” the First Patriarch replied: “Emptiness, no holiness.” In his “Song of Enlightenment” Yung Chia (Jap.: Yoka, 665-713) said:*

*In clear seeing, there is not one single thing  
There is neither man nor Buddha.*

*...As clearly shown in this passage (Phil. 2:5-8), Jesus Christ is God who became flesh by emptying himself, even unto death. It is really through this kenotic negation that flesh and spirit, the secular and the sacred, the immanent and the transcendent became identical in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus Christ may be said to be the Christian symbol of Ultimate Reality. So far, this Christian idea of the kenotic Christ is close to the idea of “neither man nor Buddha”. At least it may be said that Christianity and Zen represent Ultimate Reality in similar terms, where the immanent and the transcendent, the secular and the sacred, are paradoxically one.*

Masao Abe, “God, Emptiness, and the True Self”,  
in F. French, ed. *The Buddha Eye: an Anthology of the Kyoto School*,  
New York, Crossroad, 1982.

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b) The Muslim writer and thinker Sayyed Hossein Nasr uses his understanding of the centrality of the Christ event for Christians to convey to us how Muslims view the Qur'an and how they understand the role of the illiterate prophet Muhammad in the divine revelatory event:

*One could of course make a comparison between Islam and Christianity by comparing the Prophet to Christ, the Qur'an to the New Testament, etc.... In this way the sacred book of one religion would correspond to the sacred book in the other religion, the central figure in one religion to the central figure in the other religion and so on... But in order to understand what the Qur'an means to Muslims and why the Prophet is believed to be unlettered according to Islamic belief, it is more significant to consider this comparison from another point of view.*

*The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ. The vehicle of the Divine Message in Christianity is the Virgin Mary; in Islam it is the soul of the Prophet. The Prophet must be unlettered for the same reason that the Virgin Mary must be virgin. The human vehicle of a Divine Message must be pure and untainted. The Divine Word can only be written on the pure and "untouched" tablet of human receptivity. If this Word is in the form of flesh the purity is symbolized by the virginity of the mother who gives birth to the Word, and if it is in the form of a book this purity is symbolized by the unlettered nature of the person who is chosen to announce this Word among men... Both symbolize a profound aspect of this mystery of revelation.*

S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*,  
New York, F.A. Praeger, 1967, pp.43-44.

c) Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu, had the following to say recently about Jesus:

*From the perspective and background of my own Hindu tradition, I did not find it difficult to identify with the figure of Jesus. In fact, I found him positively attractive. Deeply attracted as I was, at that time, by the ideal of the Hindu sannyasin (monk), I was able to immediately see in Jesus many of the qualities of this ideal. Here also was a wandering spiritual teacher without home or possessions, fired by the true spirit of renunciation (vairagya). Here also was one who spoke with authority about the limitations and futility of the life which was spent solely in the selfish accumulation of wealth (artha) and transitory sense enjoyment (kama)....*

*What, therefore, initially attracted me in the personality of Jesus is the embodiment in him of what I considered to be, from my Hindu viewpoint, the ideals and values of the authentic spiritual life. This dimension of Jesus has always continued to have a meaning and appeal for me. From my own very limited perspective of Christianity, I think that this primary aspect of the personality of Christ is not always sufficiently emphasized in presenting him. I imagine that it will always be difficult to represent one who cared so little for the comforts and possessions which are usually the focus of our energies and aspirations and whose life was so totally a reflection of its centre in a higher reality. As human beings, we have mastered the art of subtly and nakedly using*

*our respective spiritual traditions and ideals to mask and serve our own insatiable ego-centred ambitions. It seems hopeless when that which is meant to free us from the constraints of the ego becomes the servant of its narrow interests. But perhaps in its concern to stress the uniqueness and originality of Jesus, Christianity has ignored some of the identities in the definition of the spiritual life which Jesus shares with the tradition of Hinduism.*

A Hindu Response to Jesus

## **2. Discussion and questions**

- a) How do these interpretations enrich or clarify our own understanding of Christ?
- b) Do you think that Christ has to be reinterpreted in every cultural situation? If so, what are the elements that would go into this reinterpretation in your own cultural and religious situation?
- c) Many religious traditions give expression to the paradoxical mystery of God (or Ultimate Reality) who is beyond human imagination and yet accessible to humankind, who is utterly transcendent and yet intimately present among us, who is beyond the highest heavens and yet within the human heart. How is the mystery of God expressed by neighbours of other faiths in your area? In what ways do they speak of transcendence? In what ways do they speak of the divine, present or incarnate or active among us?



## STUDY V

# The Experience of Salvation

### A. BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF SALVATION

#### 1. Texts

What do we mean when we use the term “salvation”? What do our neighbours of other faiths mean when they speak of salvation, or liberation? Do they use such terms at all? This question of salvation is perhaps one of the most difficult areas for inter-religious understanding and dialogue. The difficulty arises in part from the fact that definitive spiritual experience, which some may call “salvation” or “liberation”, often is intensely personal and may not lend itself to verbal communication. In addition, such experience is so decisive that those whose lives have been transformed make exclusive claims to their way of or experience of salvation. We find that there are different ways of understanding salvation in the Bible itself. Consider the following passages:

- a) *And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honour your father and mother’.” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.” And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”*

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b) *The jailer called for a light, rushed in, and fell trembling at the feet of Paul and Silas. Then he led them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your family." Then they preached the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*

Acts 16:29-32

c) *He (Jesus) stood up to read the scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written:*

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has chosen me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty  
to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind;  
to set free the oppressed  
and to announce that the time has come  
when the Lord will save his people.*

*Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. And all the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, "This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read."*

Luke 4:16-21

d) *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God,... for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await for adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies. For we have been saved in hope... For I am sure that neither death, nor life,... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Rom. 8:18-24, 38-39

### 2. Comment

The Bible speaks of salvation in many ways. Consider, in its own context, each of the texts given above. What does each say about the nature of salvation, the way of salvation?

In the conversation between Jesus and the rich young ruler there are references to "eternal life", "salvation", and "belonging to the kingdom of God". Do these refer to the same reality? What does each of these terms suggest?

As for the way of salvation, Jesus invites people to "follow him". Both obedience and renunciation seem to be required. And yet Jesus insists that salvation is something that God alone offers, even when it may seem impossible to us.

In the story of Paul and Silas with the jailer, however, we see a different emphasis. There is an invitation to "believe in the Lord Jesus" as a way of salvation.

In Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, the concept of salvation was given yet another dimension. Here salvation is spoken of in terms of "liberty to the captives", "the recovery of sight to the blind", and "setting the oppressed free". This broader dimension of the Christian understanding of salvation has certainly influenced many of the social and political movements in history.

In the last passage, St Paul speaks of salvation in cosmic terms. He related the longing of the individual to become a child of God with the groaning of the whole creation to be set free from its bondage. Here the individual's salvation is linked to the redemption of the whole created order.

In actual experience, Christians speak of salvation through Christ in many ways. To some it is the personal assurance that "my sins are forgiven". Others see salvation as evidenced in a transformed quality of life and values. Many Christians understand salvation in terms of a "heaven" beyond this life. Others insist that whatever may lie beyond this life, salvation certainly has to do with the establishment of God's kingdom of justice, righteousness and peace here on earth. Christians have also differed in expressing their understanding of the way to salvation. In answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" we are told "observe the commandments", "follow me", "give away all you have to the poor", "believe in the Lord Jesus", "set free the oppressed".

### **3. Discussion and questions**

Return to some of the questions raised in the first paragraph of this study, and discuss them in the light of the above readings on salvation. As you discuss the understandings of salvation presented here, add other images or notions of what salvation means from your own experience.

- a) How do you understand the term "salvation"? Which of the understandings above is most meaningful to you?
- b) What understanding of salvation will help us as we attempt to appreciate the spiritual experience of people of other faiths?

## **B. OTHER TESTIMONIES OF SALVATION**

### **1. Texts**

Having discussed some Christian understandings of salvation, let us listen to a few testimonies of persons of other faiths. The first is an account by a Hindu of how God's love and grace overwhelmed him. This is taken from the much-loved poetry of the *Tiruvachakam*, which plays a central role in the prayers and devotions of the South Indian Shaiva Siddhanta tradition.

- a) *I was an insignificant being, worth nothing, attaching myself from birth to birth to the grass, worm, tree, to bird, beast, demon, man, asura, sage, and deva. Embedded fearfully in ignorance and falsehood, ensnared by deluding values*

*that intensified my suffering and travail, I played on the sands of time, a puppet under the sway of the deceptive senses. Life's "partings and meetings", its change and decay within and without confused me, till I grew weary and oppressed. It was then He endowed me with unquenchable yearning for "release" from the myriad perils of human existence, and enlightened me in the stupor of darkness. My God-Guru, peerless Gem of lustrous light, impregnated me with divine Love and cut asunder all earthly ties and made me "His own, His very own!" and led me to the Rock of Grace, from whence, I contacted directly the Sun of my Soul!*

From Ratna Navaratnam, *Tiruvachakam, the Hindu Testament of Love*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963, pp.63-64.

b) In the following passage, a contemporary Buddhist writer gives a different perception on "salvation", or the spiritual goal of life, and how it may be achieved.

*Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha exclaimed: "Like a man lost in dense forest suddenly coming upon a track, a path, an ancient, forgotten path that led him to a city long lost to view, so have I, O monks, discovered a Way, a path. It is the Way revealed by the Buddhas, long lost to man in the wilderness of his thoughts..."*

*With the discovery comes light; with light comes clarity; and with clarity knowledge beyond doubt, uncertainty and fear. "Unshakeable is my mind," declared the Buddha to Subhuti, for he has penetrated beyond speculation and conjecture. "The Tathagatha has no theories, O Vaccha! He has penetrated the nature of perception. He sees forms, the arising of forms and cessation of forms..."*

*The Buddha had no use for belief in his preaching during his ministry — which lasted for about 45 years. He never called upon a hearer to believe. In this dispensation one does not have to accept a set of beliefs to begin with... The goal of Buddhist meditation is insight; that is, to penetrate through the appearance and at the reality of every phenomenon that comes within the field of attention. There is nothing secondhand in this process; no passed-over truth; no handed-down belief. One has to work for oneself — it is your own adventure...*

*In Buddhism sanctity is not hidden in a book, in a person, in a temple, or in a mantram or phrase. But one comes to that which has true sanctitude by cleansing the mind of impurities, by refining it through right views and then making it subtle by right meditation. The mind made pure, refined and subtle leads to saintliness, bliss and blessedness.*

Ven. M. Sumedha Thera, "An Analytical Aspect of the Buddha Dharma", in *The Young Buddhist*, 1977, pp. 30-32.

c) The notion that God seeks out and embraces those who follow Him is made clear in the famous and oft-quoted Muslim Hadith, which is ascribed to God: "If my servant draws nearer to Me by a handsbreadth, I draw nearer to him by an armslength, and if he draws nearer to Me by an armslength, I draw nearer to him by twice that distance. And if he comes walking to meet Me, I come

running to meet him" (al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, Book 97, Section 50, Hadith 1). The experience of having been met, touched, and transformed by God is told by many of the Sufis, such as the tenth century al-Junayd:

*Now I have known, O Lord, what lies within my heart;  
In secret, from the world apart  
my tongue hath talked with my Adored.*

*So in a manner we  
united are, and One;  
Yet otherwise disunion  
is our state eternally.*

*Though from my gaze profound  
deep awe hath hid Thy face,  
In wondrous and ecstatic Grace  
I feel Thee touch my inmost ground.*

A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: an Account of the Mystics of Islam*,  
London, Allen & Unwin, 1950, p. 59.

d) In the Passover seder, Jews affirm that the Holy One, blessed be He, not only redeemed the children of Israel long ago, but redeems us in every generation:

*Therefore, we are bound to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honour, bless, extol, and adore Him who performed all these miracles for our fathers and for us. He has brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to holiday, from darkness to great light, and from bondage to redemption. Let us then recite before him a new song: Hallelujah!*

*The Passover Haggadah*, N.H. Glatzer, ed.,  
New York, Schocken Books, 1953, p. 51.

## 2. Comment

Testimony to the experience of God's grace, love, and saving power is not unique to Christians. The texts presented here show different aspects of the issues faced when we think theologically about salvation in the context of other faiths.

The Muslim texts attest not only the human experience of being touched by God's grace, but the divine intention to seek out the soul that inclines in the slightest towards God. The Passover Haggadah attests to the experience of every generation of Jews of having been brought "from slavery to freedom", "from bondage to redemption".

## 3. Discussion and questions

Discuss these texts together, adding to them the experiences and insights that those in your group are able to bring to the understanding of them.

a) What questions and insights do we gain as we listen to the testimonies of salvation, liberation, or redemption from people of other faiths?

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- b) In your experience, how do friends of other faiths speak about such decisive spiritual experiences as salvation or liberation in their tradition?
- c) How can we deal theologically with the experience of salvation, liberation, redemption, etc. to which persons of other faiths bear testimony? Christians maintain various attitudes towards the salvation of people of other faiths, i.e.:
  - \* Some maintain the position that only the confessing community of Christ is saved. It used to be said that “outside the church there is no salvation”. As one such theologian put it, “If they die without knowledge of Jesus Christ, they perish.”
  - \* Others have taken the position that because of God’s providence and goodness, God’s saving designs must extend to all people. People of other faiths may indeed be saved, but in this view they are saved by Christ, whose grace is the constitutive cause of salvation. Christ is the Way that includes all other ways.
  - \* Still other Christians are critical of such an inclusivist insistence that our neighbours are saved by Christ, whether they know it or not. This, they feel, is spiritually patronizing and does violence to our neighbours’ self-understanding. They may also disagree with the exclusivist claim. As one group of the United Church of Canada put it: “If there is no salvation outside the church, we reject such a salvation for ourselves. We come to this notion of the salvation of others through being loved by Christ. We would be diminished without the others as others.”
- d) What do you think about the various attitudes sketched above? Do people in your group recognize one or another of these attitudes as their own? Can you state these attitudes more fully in your own situation? Are there other attitudes that people in your group hold?
- d) Other faith traditions also make claims to the uniqueness of their spiritual path, their relation to God, or their experience of redemption. How do we respond to these many claims to uniqueness? Can each be unique in its own way? How can religious people live together with these claims?

## NOTES



## STUDY VI

# Witness in a Religiously Plural World

### A. OUR WITNESS AND OTHER WITNESSES

#### 1. Texts

Christians are called to bear witness to the good news, a witness expressed through the word of proclamation, in the liturgy of the church, and in the life of service. But what of the witness of people of other faiths? Even though Christians are surrounded by people who have their own witness to offer, there is sometimes very little awareness of the intensity with which others wish to offer their witness and the universality of the message they bring. Listen to the following witnesses:

- a) Swami Vivekananda, who brought energy and insight to the Hindu renaissance of the late nineteenth century, had this to say after his journey in the 1890s to the USA and Europe:

*Spirituality must conquer the West. Slowly they are finding out that what they want is spirituality to preserve them as nations. They are waiting for it. They are eager for it. Where is the supply to come from? Where are the men ready to go out to every country in the world with the message of the great sages of India? Where are the men who are ready to sacrifice everything so that this message shall reach every corner of this world? Such heroic souls are wanted to help the spread of truth. Such heroic workers are wanted to go abroad and help; to disseminate the great truths of the Vedanta. The world wants it; without it the world will be destroyed.*

*The Complete Works of Vivekananda,*  
Almora, Advaita Ashrama, 1924-32, III, p.276.

- b) *From the start of his mission to the end, the Prophet never lost track of the universal nature of his mission, whether he was preaching to relations, Arabs, or addressing the whole of mankind. This mission is Islam. Islam is total submission to the one true God, the Creator, the Sustainer and the Supreme*

*Sovereign of all the world. Muslims are therefore charged with the noble mission of bringing the whole world to its Supreme Sovereign, and of freeing it from servitude to any false god. The propagation of Islam to all people is a religious duty which must be undertaken by all true Muslims by following the good example of the Prophet who was sanctioned as "Mercy for all mankind".*

Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk,  
*Islam and Christianity: a Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*,  
Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981, p.76.

c) Ven. Ananda Mangala Thera speaks of Buddhism as an “evangelistic religion” which sees the need for tolerance and understanding in the very act of witnessing:

*In multi-religious societies evangelism is to be understood as a calm and a peaceful exercise in the propagation of religious beliefs. It also requires a respectful understanding of co-existence with other religious beliefs, whether primitive or more developed. Evangelization needs a disciplined code of “truthfulness” in furthering human resources to gain “freedom and happiness”, not only here and now, but also in the “here-after”...*

*Buddhism is undoubtedly the first evangelistic religion, followed by Christianity and Islam. When Gautama Buddha admonished his disciples in the following words, Buddha Dhamma became an evangelistic religion: “Go ye forth, O Bhikkhus, on your journey, for the profit of the many, for the bliss of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the profit, the bliss of devas and mankind, go not, any two together. Proclaim, O Bhikkhus, the Dhamma glorious in the beginning, glorious in its middle and glorious in its ending.”...*

Emperor Ashoka established a golden rule of ethics (regarding evangelism) when he admonished in the following manner:

*One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religion of others; but one should also honour others' religions for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise, one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religion, and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking: “I will glorify my own religion”. But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely, as concord is good. Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others.*

## 2. Comment

In these passages we find that people of various religious traditions also understand themselves as commissioned to bear witness to their faith. In Islam the propagation of the faith is seen as a religious duty, for the message of Islam is understood to be universal. In the Buddhist text we see a similar emphasis; the path of Buddhism is seen as a way that would bring liberation to all people. There is,

however, a call to Buddhist missions to be based on profound love and concern for humanity and respect for other faiths. In Swami Vivekananda's speech there is a sense of urgency. He sees the world — especially the industrialized world — to be in danger of religious bankruptcy and spiritual peril. He calls upon the Hindus to volunteer to bring the message of the sages of India to the world, without which "the world will be destroyed". He sensed that the spirituality of the East was urgently needed to balance the growing materialism and soullessness of the West.

As Christians we have often thought of ourselves as the bearers of the message and others as mere recipients. We have looked at witness mostly as a one-way process. How then can we respond to these passages from people of other faiths which point to a similar sense of urgency, commitment and a sense of obligation to bear witness to the world?

This has become an important question because there is an amazing resurgence of religion in our world today. Some see this phenomenon as the rejection of the secular, technological culture and a search for a spiritual basis for life. In responding to this quest all religions have become manifestly "missionary" in character. They all seek to provide an understanding of the human predicament and project a way to overcome it which would be meaningful to the contemporary person. We are, of course, aware that not everything about the religious revival of our time has been a blessing. But can we any longer ignore the fact that we live in a world where there are many witnesses? How can we cope with the plurality of witness which is a reality of our age?

### **3. Discussion and questions**

Discuss the message contained in the testimony of these witnesses. Are there others you have heard, known, or read about who present a powerful witness to their faith, in word or deed?

- a) What is your understanding of such witness on the part of people of other faiths? How do *they* understand it? This is a question you might wish to discuss in dialogue with neighbours of other faiths. If you do so, you may also discuss methods of bearing witness, and the legitimacy of bearing such witness in today's world.
- b) What do you think Paul meant when he said: "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness"? (Acts 14:16-17)
- c) Despite the fact of their differing beliefs and traditions, Christians and people of other faiths often work and struggle together for justice and social change. We as Christians understand our engagement in the struggle for justice to be part of our Christian witness. How do we understand the witness of those who join with us? What implications does this have for interfaith dialogue?

## B. DIFFERENT BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

### 1. Texts

The biblical writers present us with a variety of understandings of witnessing to the Christian faith. Through the centrality given to particular texts our view of witness has been shaped in particular ways. In the light of what you have learned about witness in other faiths look at the following biblical passages:

Acts 1:8 — *Being* witnesses.

I Cor. 11:26 — Celebration of the eucharist as the act of witness.

Matt. 28:19 — Making disciples of nations.

Matt. 25:31-46 — Witness as service. (There are scholars who disagree with the service-centred interpretation of this passage.)

Here are some thoughts on Christian witness in the world :

a) *Our obedience in mission should be patterned on the ministry and teaching of Jesus... Churches are free to choose the way they consider best to announce the Gospel to different people in different circumstances. But these options are never neutral. Every methodology illustrates or betrays the Gospel we announce. In all communication of the Gospel, power must be subordinate to love.*

From *Mission and Evangelism: an Ecumenical Affirmation*, Geneva, WCC, 1983, Paragraph 28.

b) *It is Christian faith in the Triune God... which calls us Christians to human relationship with our many neighbours. Such relationship includes dialogue: witnessing to our deepest convictions and listening to those of our neighbours. It is the Christian faith which sets us free to be open to the faiths of others, to risk, to trust and to be vulnerable. In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance.*

From *Guidelines on Dialogue*, Geneva, WCC, 1979, p.16.

c) *The content of the Church's witness is the continuation of Jesus' ministry: kerygma (proclamation), diakonia (service) and koinonia (fellowship). The witness is not just the numerical and geographical expansion of the Christian faith nor is it a form of ecclesiastical propaganda in a spirit of triumphalism. It is the identification of the Church with the oppressed, the struggle for liberation and service among the poor. Witness is first of all internal, that is, the self-penetration of the Church into the profound roots and dimensions of its nature and existence, and then external, in other words, the self-realization of the Church in time and space. These two aspects of witness are intimately and dynamically inter-related. Therefore, witness is not one of the functions of the Church: the Church does not have a witness, it is the witness.*

From *Martyria — Mission: the Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Bria, WCC, 1980, p. 213.

*... Hence the worshipping community itself is an act of witness. On the other hand, the nourishment received in the Eucharist enables each community member to become witness to Christ's life in the world. Eucharist is the source of Church life and mission, the inner stimulus which motivated the community for mission. Thus the Liturgy must not be a closed event limited to the celebration in the church and to the nominal members of the Church; it has to be continued in the lives of the faithful in all dimensions of life. One cannot separate Liturgy and life, therefore there is a "liturgy" after Liturgy... Mission was not primarily seen as an opportunity to extend geographically the frontiers of the churches, but rather as a way of continuing Christ's life in the life of humanity.*

*Ibid.*, pp.8,10.

### 3. Discussion and questions

Discuss your understanding of witness, drawing on the above statements and on your own experience. Describe the nature of your own witness in your situation. How is the witness of the church or of individual Christians received? What have been the obstacles? In discussing your own situation, consider the following questions:

- a) How do the terms "mission", "evangelism", "witness", and "dialogue" describe the relation or attitude of the church to people of other faiths? What distinctions would you like to make between or among these terms and the attitudes they suggest?
- b) In the light of your study and experience with people of other faiths, what can we learn about the way and the spirit in which we bear witness to the gospel today?
- c) "In dialogue, conviction and openness are held in balance." How can this be done, individually and corporately?



## STUDY VII

# Spirituality

### A. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO SPIRITUALITY

#### 1. Texts

The concept of spirituality varies between religions. Also, the word “spirituality” is understood in many ways within various religious traditions. First let us consider the following texts which, in one way or another, deal with the area of spirituality.

a) Swami Krishnananda says the following in relation to one form of Hindu spirituality:

*The spirit of sadhana (spiritual discipline) in the inner part is more important than the outward form with which most people usually busy themselves... It is to be remembered that sadhana is not any kind of bodily action that is outwardly demonstrated in the world, but a state of mind, a condition of thinking, a consciousness in which one lives. Suppose one counts ten thousand beads on a particular day, with a heart filled with rancour,... the beads are not going to do one any good. All actions are symbols of an inward mood of mind. And when the mood is absent, the action itself has no significance... It is difficult to make one understand that the spirit of sadhana is determined by the extent to which one aspires for God-realization...*

*Spiritual Life*, The Divine Life Society, U.P., India, pp.11-16.

b) Here is a prayer of a modern Hindu sage, Ramana Maharshi:

*Within the heart's cave Brahman ever shines.  
There, all alone is "I" the self-aware.  
Then enter deep in the heart by search for Self  
Or diving deep by meditation's means  
Or stilling mind by use of breath-control.  
Thus may'st thou find sure rest within the Self.*

A.N. Sharma, *Modern Saints and Mystics*,  
The Divine Life Society, U.P., India, 1978, p.133.

### 36 *My Neighbour's Faith — and Mine*

c) Orthodox tradition within Christianity speaks of spirituality in terms of *theosis* or deification. The following passage explains the final goal of spiritual life:

*The aim of the Christian life which Orthodox spirituality describes as the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God can equally be defined in terms of deification (theosis). The Church Fathers, as for example St Basil the Great, described man as a native creature whose final goal is the attainment of theosis, "deification" or "divinization". For Orthodoxy humankind's salvation and redemption means its deification.*

*Behind the doctrine of deification there lies the belief that man is made in the image and likeness of God, the Holy Trinity. "May they all be one", Christ prayed at the Last Supper: "as thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee, so also may they be in us" (John 17:21). Just as the three persons of the Holy Trinity "dwell" in one another in an unceasing koinonia of love, so man, made in the image of the Trinity, is called to "dwell" in the Trinitarian God.*

*The mystical union between God and man is a true union, yet in this union Creator and creature do not become fused into one single being. Unlike some Eastern religions which understand God-soul union as total identification, Orthodox mystical theology has always insisted that man, however closely linked to God, retains his full personal integrity. Man, when deified, remains distinct (though not separate) from God. The Mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of unity in diversity and those who express the Trinity in themselves do not sacrifice their personal characteristics. Therefore, man does not become God by nature, but is merely a "created God", a god by grace or by status.*

Gennadios Limouris, Theological Significance Study,  
Workshop II, Bossey 1986.

d) There is also a tradition within the church which speaks of spirituality primarily in terms of Christian discipleship in the commitment to justice. It has been said: "The question of bread for myself is a material question. The question of bread for my neighbour is a spiritual question." An ecumenical group gathered at Annecy in France in December 1984, to explore the marks of "A Spirituality for Our Times". Discipleship in service, the group recognized, is one of those "marks".

*It is a spirituality that is expressed in service and witness. We are to be a servant church, willing to divest ourselves of the allurements of power, fully involved in the daily struggles of the people, recognizing the wholeness of God's kingdom. We are to be a witnessing church, committed to the non-violent struggle for peace and reconciliation with creation and with one another. The God of history and Jesus of Nazareth direct us to throw in our lot with the poor and oppressed. To learn the gospel from them and to live in solidarity with them. To confront the sinful structures that oppress them. This will require repentance, conversion, and suffering. And we rejoice when the body is built up in integrity and freedom. Our faithfulness is judged by the inclusiveness of our communities and by the compassion we show to the least among us, the hungry, the naked, the sick and imprisoned.*

A Spirituality for Our Times, Geneva, WCC, 1985, pp.18-19.

## 2. Discussion and questions

How do you respond to these statements on the meaning of spirituality? Is its purpose to wean ourselves from the tastes of this world and develop a taste for God alone, that our passions and ambitions may be transformed Godward? Is it to dwell in God through the power of the Holy Spirit? Is it to be actively at work in the service of the poor and oppressed, in the work of reconciliation and non-violence? What other understandings of spirituality do you have?

- Whom do you consider to be a “spiritual”, “holy”, or “saintly” person? What are the qualities of such a person? Have you encountered such “holiness” in persons of other faiths?
- If or when you come across saintliness or holiness in someone of another faith, how do you understand this theologically?

## B. THE SPIRITUALITY OF PRAYER

### 1. Texts

Spirituality, of course, inevitably involves some form of spiritual discipline such as prayer or meditation from which one draws strength and insight. As Christians, we are a people who pray. We pray in a great variety of ways. We open our hearts to God, we speak and are spoken to, in prayer. We live amidst people of other faiths who also pray. How do we understand the prayers of our neighbours?

- At dawn, an elderly Hindu woman stands in her dripping sari in the waters of the River Ganges, her rites of bathing completed, her hands folded in prayer:

*At dawn I worship Shiva, the Lord who is half-man, half-woman, the Primeval Lord who is the cause of the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of this world, the Lord of the Universe, the conqueror of the world who captivates also my heart, who is the one infallible remedy for the afflictions of earthly life.*

Adapted from “A Morning Hymn to Shiva”,  
Altar Flowers, Calcutta, Advaita Ashram, 1953.

- At noontime in Indonesia, a Muslim man excuses himself from the company of his Christian friend to join Muslims throughout the world who bow down in prayer. “I must remember our Creator,” he explains to his companion. He begins with Islam’s most universal prayer:

*In the Name of God, the merciful Lord of mercy.*

*Praise be to God, the Lord of all being.*

*The merciful Lord of mercy, Master of the day of judgment,*

*You alone we serve and to you alone we come for aid.*

*Guide us in the straight path,*

*The path of those whom you have blessed,*

*Not of those against whom there is displeasure,*

*Nor of those who go astray.*

The “Fatihah”, Qur'an, Surah 1, Kenneth Cragg, trans.

### 38 *My Neighbour's Faith — and Mine*

c) On Friday evening a Jewish mother lights the candles on the supper table as the family begins the Sabbath service. Their prayers include this one:

*God of might, light of the world, bless us with a perfect blessing in Your presence. Enlighten our eyes with Your light and Your truth, just as we light the Sabbath candles before You, and so make a spirit of trust and love dwell in our homes. Guide us with the light of Your presence, for in Your light we see light. Send Your blessing to every home of Israel and to the whole world, and set peace and eternal blessing upon them. Amen.*

*Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship*, edited by the Assembly of Rabbis of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, London, 1977, p.315.

d) A Kikuyu from Kenya offers a traditional prayer of his people:

*O my Father, Great Elder,  
I have no words to thank you,  
But with your deep wisdom  
I am sure that you can see  
How I value your glorious gifts.  
O my Father, when I look upon your greatness,  
I am confounded with awe.  
O Great Elder,  
Ruler of all things earthly and heavenly,  
I am your warrior,  
Ready to act in accordance with your will.*

e) This prayer comes from the Shona people (Zimbabwe):

*Great Spirit!  
Piler up of the rocks into towering mountains!  
When thou stampest on the stone,  
The dust rises and fills the land,  
Hardness of the precipice;  
Waters of the pool that turn  
Into misty rain when stirred.  
Vessel overflowing with oil!  
Father of Runji,  
Who seweth the heavens like cloth:  
Let him knit together that which is below.  
Caller forth of the branching trees:  
Thou bringest forth the shoots  
That they stand erect.  
Thou hast filled the land with mankind,  
The dust rises on high, oh Lord!  
Wonderful One, thou livest  
In the midst of the sheltering rocks,  
Thou givest of rain to mankind:  
We pray to thee, Hear us, Lord!*

*Show mercy when we beseech thee, Lord.  
 Thou art on high with the spirits of the great.  
 Thou raisest the grass-covered hills  
 Above the earth, and createst the rivers,  
 Gracious One.*

From John S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, London, SPCK, and Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1975, pp.148f.

## 2. Comment

As Christians, we recognize acts we perceive as “prayer” in the lives of people of other faiths. Some prayers are spoken; others are unspoken. We can affirm from our own experience of prayer that, in the yearning of the heart towards God, words may not come readily. According to St Paul, it is the Spirit who enables us to pray when we cannot find the words to pray, and it is the Spirit that intercedes for us “with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8). Contemplation or silent meditation is also a form of prayer or “centring”.

Prayer too may require the discipline of practice. Devout Hindus pray three times a day, or at least at dawn and nightfall. Muslims remember God in prayer five times a day. Many Orthodox disciplines of prayer aim to inculcate the perpetual remembrance of God.

What does it mean that we as Christians are people of prayer living in the midst of other peoples of prayer? The Jewish writer Chaim Potok puts the issue powerfully in the question of a young Jewish rabbi travelling in Japan. At a Buddhist shrine, he observed an old Japanese man, prayer book in hand, slowly swaying back and forth as he stood in prayer. The young rabbi asked his Jewish companion, “Do you think our God is listening to him?”

I don’t know, ... I never thought of it.

Neither did I until now. If He’s not listening, why not? If he is listening, then — well, what are we all about?” (*The Book of Lights*, New York, Fawcett Crest, 1981, pp.261-2).

The rabbi’s question is a profoundly important theological question: If God is not listening, why not? What kind of God do we understand God to be that he would not listen to the ardent prayers of this man? If God is listening, then what is distinctive about us as a community? Who are we who have especially claimed the ear of God?

## 3. Discussion and questions

If you have not yet visited a place of worship, a monastery, a meditation hall of another religious tradition, this would be a good time to do so as a group. If possible, arrange to attend a worship event and try to find out from the participants as much as possible about the songs, prayers, and rituals which make up the worship. Discuss the event, both in terms of what it meant for the participants and what it meant to members of your group who went as guests or observers.

With this as part of your collective experience as a group, reflect on the prayers above, and on other prayers and aspects of spiritual discipline that you know about from your neighbours and colleagues of other faiths.

Do you think it is meaningful to speak of a particular prayer as "Hindu", "Muslim", "Christian", etc.? If so, in what sense? If not, why not? What is "Christian" about the Lord's Prayer, which is, of course, a Jewish prayer in origin?

## C. SHARING IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

### 1. Text

Now listen to this text where witness is given by a person on how her spiritual life was enriched by incorporating techniques of meditation that belong to another religious tradition. The passage comes from *Zen and Me* by Ann E. Chester, who, remaining a convinced Christian, practised Zazen, sitting meditation, for many years:

*I knew from experience that an authentic prayer life had to involve more than "saying prayers". Zen helped me to clarify my concepts and to grow in a more contemplative stance towards life. I saw this stance as twofold: inner and outer.*

*The practice of Zazen became a way to develop the inner stance. Spoken word really tends to limit God, limiting him to the meaning of the words spoken. But "centring down" as the Quakers put it, remaining at the "still point" within, completely open to the all-pervading energy of God, was to be in touch with myself, with who I really am; it is also to give God full freedom to help me become what I am capable of being... Zazen has helped me to seek that depth, to be at home there, to deepen it, to act out of it.*

*The outer contemplative stance is described in the Christian tradition as "a loving glance". It is really the eye of the poet, or of any artist, the open eye that looks with love on all reality, seeing nothing as unimportant, nothing as uninteresting....*

*Two aspects of Zen deepened this outward contemplative stance. One was the directive "to keep the eyes open" because the practice of Zazen was not to "shut out reality" but to "make one more aware of reality". That appealed to me as an antidote to any "ivory-tower praying", always a danger to be avoided by the contemplative. A second deepening influence was the Zen openness to nature. The practice of mindfulness, of being completely present wherever I am, increased my awareness of beauty in often overlooked places, like noticing the velvet cameos of the milkweed blossom as I walked along a dusty lane... When I practise Zazen, centring down to that "still point" within, I am not only in touch with myself and with God; I am in touch with all humankind, with all reality. I find the horizons of my prayer and of my consequent action constantly expanding. I become more aware of what it means to be a member of the human family and of the earth community. And as I become more adept in the twofold movement — advance without, retreat within — I am growing in the realization that the inner and the outer contemplative stances are not at all separate paths. It is only illusion to think they are. They have always been one. And to walk in*

*this path means to act out responsibility not from duty, not from zeal, not from any desire to play the hero, the saviour, the martyr; it is rather to act spontaneously out of the integralness of our nature, which is HUMANITY.*

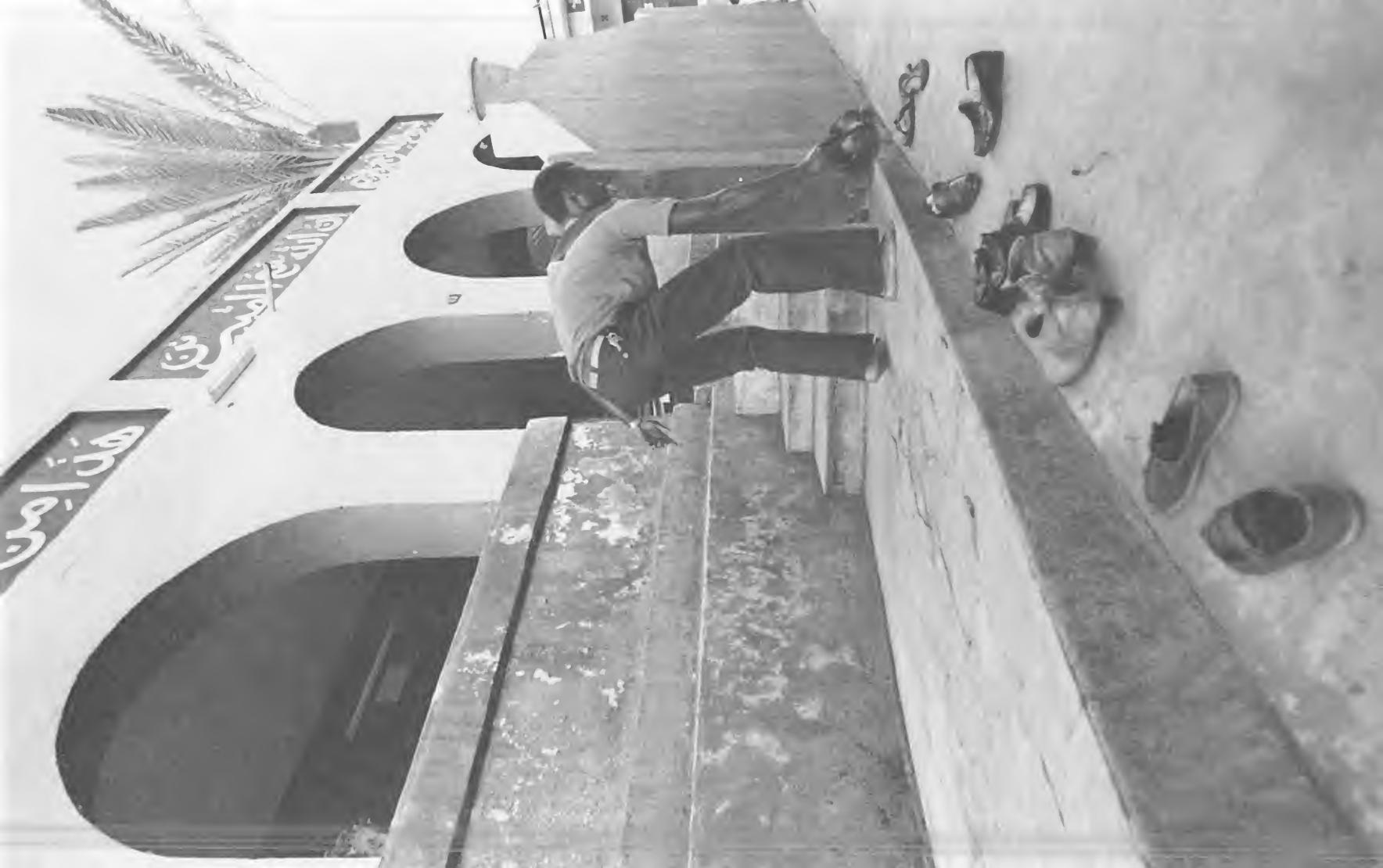
In *Spring Wind*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1984-85, pp.25-27.

## **2. Discussion and questions**

Discuss the testimony of this woman. Are there other examples you can think of where Christians have explored or benefited from the spiritual resources of another tradition, remaining fundamentally grounded in Christianity? Do you know of people of other faiths who have explored or benefited from the spiritual resources of the Christian tradition, while still remaining firmly a part of their own tradition?

- a) What are the issues involved in the “sharing” of spiritual traditions?
- b) How do you understand the Holy Spirit, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the “spiritual” life? What do we mean when we speak of the “spiritual” life of people of other faiths?

For further discussion of some of the specific issues of inter-religious sharing, you might invite people from a local interfaith council, if there is one in your area, to discuss together some of the issues being faced on the question of worship and spirituality when persons of different religious traditions meet.



## STUDY VIII

# Community

### A. THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AND THE COMMUNITY OF HUMANKIND

#### 1. Texts

Consider the following texts from the Bible :

a) *When the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between human beings and all living beings on earth. That is the sign of the promise which I am making to all living beings.*

Gen. 9:16-17

b) *The Lord says, "I am making a new earth and new heavens. The events of the past will be completely forgotten... Wolves and lambs will eat together; lions will eat straw, as cattle do, and snakes will no longer be dangerous. On Zion, my sacred hill, there will be nothing harmful or evil."*

Is. 65:17, 24-25

c) *He said therefore, "What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."*

Luke 13:18-19

Community is basic to Christian faith. The communion of believers is rooted in our understanding of God as Trinity. We see the community of the church as the body of Christ. There are many beautiful images of the church as a community. See, for example, Paul's image of the Body and its many parts in 1 Cor. 12:12-30 and Peter's image of a house of living stones in 1 Pet. 2.

The texts above, however, take us beyond ourselves to the larger community which is God's goal for creation. Although our community, our family so to speak, is the church, the kingdom of God is larger than the church. The hospitality of the kingdom, like that of a great tree, is widespread. The kingdom of God stretches our minds and hearts towards a larger vision of the transformed human community that God intends.

What do we mean when we, as Christians, speak of “community”? Our own particular, familiar community of the church? The wider “community of communities” that is humankind? The envisioned community of the kingdom of God? We have long had a certain tension within Christian thinking as to where the emphasis should be. This tension is suggested in the text from the 1977 WCC consultation on “Dialogue in Community”, held in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

*As Christians, therefore, we are conscious of a tension between the Christian community as we experience it to be in the world of human communities, and as we believe it in essence to be in the promise of God. The tension is fundamental to our Christian identity. We cannot resolve it, nor should we seek to avoid it. In the heart of this tension we discover the character of the Christian Church as a sign at once of people's need for fuller and deeper community, and of God's promise of a restored human community in Christ. Our consciousness of the tension must preclude any trace of triumphalism in the life of the Christian Church in the communities of humankind. It must also preclude any trace of condescension towards our fellow human beings. Rather it should evoke in us an attitude of real humility towards all peoples since we know that we together with all our brothers and sisters have fallen short of the community which God intends.*

*Guidelines on Dialogue*, paragraph 14.

## 2. Questions and discussion

Discuss the texts that speak of a universal covenant and community. Where do they come from, and what do you think is their meaning? What images does the New Testament give us of the community of the church? Read the passage mentioned above where Paul speaks of the one body with its many members, or where Peter speaks of the house of living stones. What other New Testament adjectives or images describe the nature of the Christian community? What adjectives or images would you use to describe the Christian community today?

- a) What do you think is the relation of the particular community we call the church to the wider community envisioned in the kingdom of God?
- b) What should be the relation of our own local church or our denominational “family” to the worldwide church? What should be the relation of the Christian family to other families of faith?
- c) What is the theological basis for our thinking about the Christian community and its role in the wider community of humankind? How would you describe the Christian community of women and men, clergy and laity, of denominational diversities, to someone of another faith community?

## B. UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITY IN OTHER RELIGIONS

### 1. Texts

The concept of community is also basic to other faiths, as is the question of how one particular community relates to the larger or worldwide human community. For

Jews, for example, being part of the community is much more than being a member of a group. It is participation in a covenant relationship with God. While God's covenant with Noah was a universal covenant with all humankind, God's covenant with Abraham is understood as unique to the Jews.

Muslims have a very strong sense of the particularity of their community, but they see Islam as the one community which transcends all barriers and is the ultimate expression of God's will for all people. Some Muslims may even speak of the *ummah al-da'wa*, the *ummah* (community) of hope, extending the Muslim vision of community not just to Muslims, but to all who willingly share in God's mission on earth.

The Buddhist *sangha* (community) is the fellowship of those monks and nuns who have committed themselves to a life of spiritual discipline, but the larger *chatur-sangha*, the "community of the four directions", includes both monks and laity and may be seen as the embodiment of the truth of the Buddha. Again, in African traditions, the sense of community extends beyond the immediate generation of people to those who have ceased to exist in the body, to spirits, and to nature.

There is today an increasing awareness of the need for a wider community, transcending traditional boundaries of race, nation, and religion. Clearly the importance of envisioning a wider community is recognized by people of other faiths as well. Listen to these testimonies:

a) *Jainism does not regard birth in a family as of much consequence, since it does not recognize the caste system, but judges everyone by his way of life. We all live and thrive on the services of numerous beings, known and unknown; hence it is but appropriate that all of us render service to our fellow beings to help their progress... Mutual understanding and tolerance heighten the joy of social and ethical life to pave the way for fellow-feeling and brotherhood. With that end in view, Jain thinkers propounded... the doctrine of many points-of-view to infuse the spirit of tolerance and breadth of vision, enlightened by generous outlook on other religions and their principles ....*

J.K. Tukol in *Religion in the Struggle for World Community*,  
Proceedings of WCRP III, ed., Homer A. Jack,  
New York, 1980, p.234.

b) *Islam teaches us that a consequence of belief in the oneness of God is an appreciation of the unity of all mankind. The Qur'an emphasizes that all men were created from one man: God blew His spirit into Adam who, according to several verses of the Qur'an, was the original man. Man is not uniform in all aspects, but Islam teaches us that the differences in language and way of life of various nations and groups of men are signs of God's greatness. Within this context it is also pointed out that mankind is basically one, and that therefore all nations and groups of men should endeavour to come to an agreement on various fundamental points, the most essential of which is the belief that God is One and that all men belong to one family.*

H.A. Mukti Ali, "Religions, Nations and the Search for a World Community", in *Christian Muslim Dialogue*, eds S.J. Samartha and J.B. Taylor, WCC, 1973.

c) Here two persons belonging to two religious communities are attempting to show how their religious tradition does recognize the need to acknowledge and be part of a wider community. In the following text, a Hindu challenges us that all religious traditions are in serious need of rethinking the way they have understood the nature of the community they seek:

*Time has come for world religions to make a new departure. Confronted as they are with fundamental problems of human survival and destiny, they have both the responsibility and the opportunity to cooperate with one another in the promotion of human community and well-being. There are differences between them and will continue to be, and they need to be respected and preserved...*

*Traditional theology, developed in religious isolation, has now become inadequate, if not obsolete; it does not permit the different religious traditions to live side by side in friendly cooperation. Religious conflict has become tragic and pointless; no single religious tradition can expect to displace all the other religions. As far as we can see, human community will continue to be religiously pluralistic. Each religion should come to terms with this fact, and attempt to do justice to the religious experience of mankind as a whole. By a deep and a thorough investigation of its respective heritage, each tradition should open up a new spiritual horizon hospitable to the faiths of other people. The future usefulness of any religious tradition depends on its ability to cooperate with other traditions.*

K.L. Seshagiri Rao, "Human Community and Religious Pluralism — a Hindu Perspective", in *Dialogue in Community*, ed. C.D. Jathanna, Mangalore, India, The Karnataka Theological Research Institute, 1982, p.162.

## 2. Discussion and questions

How do the people of other faiths in your area think of their own community? How do they think of themselves in relation to the wider, more diverse community around them, which includes you as Christians? Invite people from that community to discuss with you the question of what is particular and what is common in our experience and understanding of community.

- a) Together, describe the communities in your area. Where does your life in community naturally intersect? Where is your community life carried on separately?
- b) Are there particular areas where you need greater understanding of one another's sense of community? In questions of marriage or intermarriage? At times of festivals or holy days?
- c) Discuss the relation of women and men in your respective communities. Are changes occurring in the role and image of both women and men?
- d) What are the major reasons for conflict within and between religious communities? Can you illustrate from your own experience? What do you think is the role of religions in the search for peace and the resolving of conflicts? Think of examples where religions have served as agents of reconciliation.

## NOTES



## STUDY IX

# Hope and Vision

### 1. Texts

Consider the following verses from the Bible:

- a) *Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.*  
Matt. 6:10
- b) *If our hope in Christ is for this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.*  
1 Cor. 15:19
- c) *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished.... I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: "Now God's home is with mankind! He will live with them, and they shall be his people.... The peoples of the world will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their wealth to it. The gates of the city will stand open all day; they will never be closed, because there will be no night there. The greatness and the wealth of the nations will be brought into the city...*  
Rev. 21:1, 3, 24-26
- d) *I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us ... yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God.*  
Rom. 8:18, 20, 21

### 2. Comment

Each of these biblical texts deals with different aspects of the Christian vision and hope. In the prayer that Jesus taught us, we ask for the reign of God to come here on earth and for God's will to be done here as in heaven. And yet in the Corinthian passage St Paul reminds us that our faith in Christ is not for this earthly life only, but also for what lies beyond. In the passage from the Book of Revelation we encounter the hope of a total transformation of the created order. Here hope is expressed in terms of a life in God for the whole human race. The greatness

and wealth of the nations are brought to the feet of God in whose light all peoples walk.

St Paul expresses this same sentiment when he speaks of the sufferings of the present time as not worth comparing with the glory that is to come. For in his expression of hope the whole creation awaits with eager longing to share the glorious freedom of the children of God!

From these texts, it seems evident that no simple “this-worldly/other-worldly” distinction can do justice to our hope. It is God’s kingdom that we await here on earth and yet its full realization has dimensions that are yet to be revealed. Christian hope is thus “active waiting” (John Wesley).

Now let us look at the way some others have expressed their hope :

a) In the following Sikh text there is an expression of hope in terms of unity with God, which liberates the person from bondages that limit one’s relationship with other people and with God:

*My heart is full of Him, this vision I have realized through the Guru.  
I regard everybody as my friend, and am the well-wisher of all men.  
The Lord has destroyed the pangs of separation and united me unto Himself.  
The perverse mentality has been destroyed.  
It rains nectar now, and the world of the Guru tastes sweet.  
I have seen Ram, who pervades waters and deserts and fills both the earth and the heaven.*

Dhanasari, Guru vi, 4.3, *The Sikhs and Their Scriptures*,  
C.H. Loehlin, The Lucknow Publishing House, 1964, pp.47-48.

b) In the following text, however, we see another understanding of ultimate hope. In Confucian thought the “full realization”, “self-transformation” or the “fulfilment of the human person” constitutes that hope:

*One's calling, as it were, is none other than the inner voice that enjoins one to become what one ought to be. This critical self-awareness, informed by one's openness to an ever-expanding circle of human relatedness, is the authentic access to one's proper destiny... We must transcend what we existentially are, so that we can become what we ontologically are destined to be. We need not depart from our selfhood and our humanity to become fully realized. Indeed, it is through a deepening and broadening awareness of ourselves as humans that we serve Heaven... To be religious, in the Confucian sense, is to be engaged in ultimate self-transformation as a communal act. Salvation means the full realization of the anthropocosmic reality inherent in our human nature.*

Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1985, pp.62-64.

c) In the following quotation the conviction is expressed that aspects of Marxism can enrich the Christian hope:

*Marxism can give social reality and substance to the concrete, historical expressions of religious hope. Marx exposed illusory hopes. This activity*

constituted his negative task. He particularly assailed the understandings of religious hopes that were simply and purely "other worldly". He showed how a hope that is simply and purely "other worldly" functions to leave the present order of life as it is. Such a hope ceases to be critical of the present order. It accepts the injustice and bondage of that order. It no longer troubles itself with "worldly" matters.

Naturally, those who benefit from the present order of things are going to have a lot at stake in selling people on a purely "other worldly" understanding of Christian hope. Marx exposed this fact — that an ultimate religious hope without a concrete social hope is empty and, finally, phony ....

Marx has taught me that it is not enough simply to talk about liberation or peace or reconciliation. I must also identify the real forces working for changes in my situation and become a part of those forces. Otherwise, I am not engaged in living out the hope for liberation and wholeness and peace for all (hu)man-kind which finds expression in the ultimate religious hope.

Thomas W. Ogletree, "What May Man Really Hope For?"  
in *From Hope to Liberation: Towards a New Marxist Christian Dialogue*, eds Nicholas Piediscalzi and Robert E. Thobaben, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974, pp.44,47.

d) From a multilateral dialogue between people of five religious communities comes the following, which says that people of different religious traditions do share deeply in some common hope and vision :

*In our dialogue we spoke from the standpoint of our own religious and cultural traditions, and we listened carefully to one another. We came to understand more clearly where we differ. But we also discovered where we converge and can affirm basic values and hopes together as religious people, not at the "lowest common denominator" but at the very heart of our deepest commitments and convictions.*

*We share an affirmation of the fullness and the deep inter-relatedness of all life — human life to life, human life to the life of the world of nature, and all life to its divine source. Native Americans speak of the "Great circle of creation", and Hindus speak of the fullness of life "from the Creator to a blade of grass". We heard from the Bhagavad Gita :*

*One who sees Me everywhere  
and sees everything in me,  
of him shall I never lose hold,  
and he shall never lose hold of Me.*

*We share an affirmation that we as human beings are not only given, but entrusted with, the gift of life. That sacred trust calls us to compassionate and responsible action, both personal and communal. In a world of unconscionable disparity between races, we feel deeply that our religious traditions commend us to pursue justice, with unceasing effort, not only on behalf of our own religious community, but for all.*

*The Meaning of Life*, report of a multifaith consultation, Mauritius, 25 January-3 February 1983, Geneva, WCC, p.17.

### 3. Discussion and questions

You might wish to continue the discussion of the last session with your partners in dialogue. Sharing our differing and intersecting visions of life together in community might lead naturally to the question of hope. What is it that we hold in hope for the future? Our hope for the future also shapes our understanding of the present. We interpret the world, with its injustice, suffering, and conflicts, as well as its joys, in the light of the biblical vision of hope for a kingdom of peace and love that God will bring to pass. Others interpret the world in the light of *their* vision of hope.

- a) What visions of the future are shared, and where do they diverge?
- b) To what extent must visions of the future be shared in order to make cooperation for a better future possible?
- c) How can we share our motivations and hopes in a way that enables us to engage in common struggles with others?
- d) In what ways do the hopes and visions of others enrich the way we have formulated our hope?

# Bibliography

The following are some publications that take up the underlying issues of this study for discussion and comment. There are many others, particularly in your own region, that may be helpful to you in your discussions. Those who need a longer bibliography on any one aspect of the study should please write to: Sub-unit on Dialogue, World Council of Churches, 150 route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20.

1. *Guidelines on Dialogue*, Geneva, WCC, 1979, 22pp.
2. *The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Secretariatus Pro Non Christianis, Città del Vaticano, 1984, 22pp.
- ✓ 3. Samartha, S.J., *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships*, Geneva, WCC, 1981, 160pp.
- ✓ 4. Ariarajah, S. Wesley, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths*, Geneva, WCC, 1985, 71pp.
5. Cracknell, Kenneth, *Towards a New Relationship*.
6. Mbiti, John S., *Introduction to African Religion*, New York, Praeger, 1975, 211pp.
7. Race, Alan, *Christians and Religious Pluralism, Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London, SCM Press Ltd, 1983, 176pp.
8. Lamb, Christopher, *Belief in a Mixed Society*, London, Lion, 1985, 160pp.
- ✓ 9. Knitter, Paul, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1985.

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#### Note on the Global Statistics of World Religions:

Christians: 32.4%

Muslims: 17.1%

Hindus: 13.7%

Buddhists: 6.2%

Jews: 0.4%

Source: *World Christian Encyclopedia*, ed. David B. Barrett, London, Oxford University Press, 1982, p.6.

# Illustrations

p.xii: WCC/John Taylor

p.4: WCC

p.10: Christian Aid/Margaret Murray

p.14: a) Detail from mosaic, Daphni, near Athens. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.  
b) Crucifix in wood and clay by Edilberto Merida. Photo Joseph Vail,  
M.M. Published by permission of Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, USA.  
c) Painting by Zhao Jian-ming. Reproduced by permission of the China  
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p.15: Pen and bistre drawing by Rembrandt, about 1657-60. Reproduced by  
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